

Dig Your Grave

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Summary:

The memories don't go all at once, but they are gone eventually.

Richie forgets.

Dig Your Grave

and is it over now?

do you know how

to pick up the pieces

and go home?

-- fleetwood mac,

gold dust woman

It doesn't all go at once.

He doesn't wake up one morning with all his memories of childhood gone— they flow out of the cracks in his brain like water

(like water flowing through sewers; a tunnel that smells like death and decay)

and settle somewhere deep in his subconscious. It's like he leaves Derry and the glue holding his childhood together starts to flake away. It turns him into a new person, no longer a child afraid of the dark and spiders and... something else

(clowns)

that he can't place. He becomes a man in California.

The memories don't go all at once, but they are gone eventually.

Richie forgets.

He forgets about Bev

(*"Teach me how to make it sleep,"*)

with her cigarettes and her yo-yo and freckles. He forgets Ben's laugh, his blush when he thought no one saw him staring at the sunshine glint off Bev's eyes. Mike, with his strong hands and easy smile. Stan, whose blue eyes could charm any adult and who didn't know what kosher meant despite being one of the dudes who killed Jesus

(*"I think that must have been my father," Stan says, a mischievous smile on his face*).

Stuttering Bill,

(*"You don't always do it, you know,"*)

who Richie is positive he would have died for. Bill, with his guilt and his natural charisma. Bill, with his dead brother and his savior complex.

He forgets sitting on Georgie's bed with a photo album in hand. Georgie, who couldn't yet color inside the lines and who wasn't ashamed to kiss Bill's cheek in front of anyone. Georgie, who was six

(who was six and fucking died anyone can die and something killed him something killed Georgie and it tried to kill Richie).

He forgets collapsing onto the side of the road and crying, sobbing into Bill's chest, the tears tracking hot down his cheeks and mingling with soot and dirt. Tangling his fingers in Bill's shirt and smashing his glasses against his nose. Bill's shoulder shuddering, a stutter to match the one in his speech.

He forgets

a werewolf

a Teen Werewolf

clawing at his eye, chasing him while he clutches Bill's abdomen, wind blowing through his hair and the playing cards in Silver's tire whistling in the wind. A piece of straw-like fur that he finds later stuck to his shirt. It's coarse between his fingers and *real* .

He burns the fur with a match in his bathroom, the light of the moon coming through the window and illuminating the room. He stares at himself in the mirror, the match flickering, looking back and back into the long row of flame. Hate and fear twist together and course through his veins, pumping from his toes to the top of his head. He feels it with all his being and when the match is down to the quick and burning his fingers, he blows it out with a shuddering breath.

He forgets

a leper

a bird

the bodies of dead kids, bloated and bobbing in stagnant water

the clown.

He forgets It.

Forgets crawling through the sewers, hands and knees bloody. Screaming, crying, fear. A sheer terror that pulls his stomach in a tight knot and tears its way into his throat, then out, out into the night.

Lastly, and it is last because this one takes the longest, he forgets all about Eddie Kaspbrak. Eddie, with his pink cheeks and inhaler. Eddie, with the unstable mother and his bad habit of not laughing at Richie's very funny jokes. Eddie, who could be a real bitch sometimes. Eddie, who Richie loved.

He tries with all his might to hold onto his memory of Eddie. He knows it's all gonna go someday so he keeps a picture of Eddie, taken with a cheap disposable camera by Mike on some lazy summer day, pinned to the corkboard on his desk. At first, he looks at it every day,

("I'm gonna miss you, Trashmouth,")

attempting to memorize every detail. From the glint of sunlight in Eddie's hair to the blades of grass clutched in his fingers. The dirt on his bare knees, his filthy fingernails, the almost-invisible freckles on his nose.

But Mike had been right— Derry makes them forget. It sneaks in the middle of the night and steals all of Richie's memories, taking all the things that made him the man he is today, all the things he loved once.

One day he looks and the photograph is different. Instead of a photo of Eddie, head thrown back in laughter, sitting on the banks of the river in the Barrens, there's a sunspot over Eddie's body. It's just a picture of a sunspot and some grass and what could be a kid's foot but could also be a rock. And when he tries to remember what the picture used to be, he can't recall a thing about that day. It's all just a hazy blur in his mind, the ghost of a laugh and the remnants of a childhood forgotten.

Eventually, Richie forgets all about the first boy he loved.

Sometimes, the moments come back in bits and pieces, a flash and a bang and Richie is stuck standing shocked.

He's walking down the street one day, on lunch break from the radio station, and he sees a girl with long legs and hair the color of the cherry on a cigarette and he feels this *pull* . He can't remember ever having regularly smoked in his life but suddenly he's craving nicotine and he hears a high-pitched giggle

("It's bad luck to light three on a match")

and he stops dead in his tracks. He doesn't snap out of it until he gets shouldered aside by a man in a suit and suddenly the memory is gone, like a newspaper boat shooting into the gutter.

Another time, months later, Richie's window is open. The record player is spinning some old Ramones album and a cool breeze ruffles the curtains. Richie cracks open a beer and slides into a kitchen chair, leaning over to look out the window and watch the people of California go.

People are different in California than they were in Maine. If he looked out the window at downtown Derry any later than seven in the evening, the entire town was dead.

(a corpse propped up against a dank wall, missing limbs and eyeballs, mouth stuck in an endless scream)

California stays lit long into the night, people always coming and going on the streets. It soothes Richie, to be surrounded by so much evidence of life. He leaves his bedroom window open at night too, no matter how hot it is, so the sounds of a city alive can lull him to sleep.

The street is busy tonight. There's a food truck parked a little down the block, serving falafel to a long line of young and old people. A trio of college girls jog by wearing sweatshirts with the local college's logo on them, chatting as they run. Richie takes a long drink of his beer and feels the stress of his day melt away like ice cream spilled on the sidewalk.

"Jeremey!" A young voice calls out, and Richie's attention is drawn to a boy walking a bike slowly down the sidewalk, dodging pedestrians and objects in his way. "Let me come with," a little girl is calling, chasing after the boy, little legs struggling to keep up with his longer ones.

"You ain't got a bike," the boy argues, but he stops so the girl can catch up. She huffs out a breath of indignation and glares up at him. Between the matching sleek black hair and the fond look of exasperation on the boys face, Richie bets they're brother and sister.

"Mom said I could come with," the little girl argues and the boy, Jeremey, sighs. He doesn't look all that beat up about the prospect of dragging his younger sibling along, and Richie knows the put-upon thing is all an act. Jeremey leans down and lifts the girl up, settling her on the front handlebars before climbing onto the bike himself.

“Fine,” he says, “you can

stand on my spokes if you want, Eddie,”

It's the summer of 1990, a year since It, and Richie feels like a child and a man all at the same time. He's stuck in this in-between state, forever struggling against adult obligation and the childish want of everything to stay the same forever. His mom calls it puberty. He calls it Hell.

Stan comes over one afternoon and invites Richie to the movies; some horror flick is playing a matinee and Stan still has bar mitzvah money left over. He offers to pay Richie's way and suggests they see if any of the other Losers are interested.

Bill isn't home when they go check, his mother answering the door with a far-off look. Richie's pretty sure she doesn't even notice them standing on her front porch until Stan clears his throat. Ben's in Nebraska, staying with some old aunt for the summer. He sends postcards to them all, pictures of corn that he doodles himself next to saying “Kill Me!” They don't make the long trek out to Mike's farm because they don't have the time to ride a few miles before the show.

That leaves Eddie.

Richie is slowly coming to terms with the fact that he may harbor less-than-brotherly feelings towards Eddie Kaspbrak. The previous school year had been a minefield of noticing things like the freckles on Eddie's nose and the way his tube socks slipped down further and further throughout

the day. He had hoped his stupid crush would eventually fade away, but then he starts dreaming about Eddie.

He dreams about holding Eddie's hand and like, carrying his books and kissing him .

Ugh, puberty.

He and Stan bike across town to Eddie's house, yelling back and forth about the latest Batman comic the whole way. They get dirty looks from countless adults and Richie once again wonders if the evil in their town is actually gone, or if it's just resting its eyes.

When they reach the yellow bungalow, Stan rings the doorbell and stuffs his hands back in his pockets. There are no lumbering footsteps to the door so Richie is pretty sure they're safe from interacting with Eddie's mom. Sure enough, the door swings open and Eddie himself is there, wearing a crew-neck sweater and blue jeans.

"Hey Stan, hey Richie," Eddie greets and steps outside, closing the door behind himself. He'd grown a little bit over the summer, too tall for his old pants, the sleeves of his shirts only reaching forearm.

"We're goin' to the Aladdin, you down?" Richie asks, gesturing to their bikes laying in Eddie's front yard.

"Yeah!" Eddie starts, and then his face falls. "My ma took my bike away, though, after she heard about that prank we pulled on Mrs. Davis on the

last day of school,” Stan sighs and Richie stifles an inward laugh. Be serious, Richie, he can hear his mom say, just be serious for once.

Before Richie can make pseudo-sympathetic sounds, Stan shrugs.

“That’s okay, you can stand on my spokes if you want,” Stan says.

Richie would have offered, but he doesn’t ride people double on his bike often. Firstly, if Bill is around, it always makes sense for whoever doesn’t have a bike to perch on his handlebars because his bike is bigger and faster anyway. Bill can pump his legs harder and faster than the rest of them, it only makes sense that he carries any extra weight. When Bill isn’t around, Mike’s usually second choice because he’s next strongest, with short but powerful legs, muscled from long days working on his dad’s farm. Richie is skinny, with string bean legs. He’s always last choice.

“No, that’s okay,” Eddie says, moving forward and scooping up Richie’s handlebars. “Richie rides me double all the time,” he says as Richie and Stan walk forward too. Richie almost lets out a snorting laugh at Eddie’s lie, but the pink blush on Eddie’s cheeks stops him in his tracks. He decides to let it play out and musters a Voice from somewhere deep, to see if maybe he can make Eddie blush a little more.

“Aw, of course, my dear,” Richie cries in his Southern Gentleman Voice, holding a hand out to balance Eddie as he swings a leg over the seat of the bike. “Ah can’t possibly let a purdy thing like you do nothin’ but hold onta ol’ Richie here and enjoy the ride.”

Eddie snorts, but his hands come up around Richie’s stomach and he folds his fingers together against Richie’s ribs, just above his belly button. Richie

starts pedaling away, adjusting his balance to counter the added weight, and he feels Eddie's chest press into his back, leaning forward to help Richie stay balanced.

The ride to the Aladdin is short, through a few neighborhoods and over the bridge, and Richie spends the entire journey focused on the heat on his back and the arms wrapped around his middle. Eddie is quiet, not a sound leaving his lips but the soft rasp of his breath. Richie thinks that maybe if they weren't moving so fast, wind whipping their hair, he would maybe feel Eddie's breath on his ear, his neck.

He spends the movie uncharacteristically silent and hyper-aware of Eddie's arm on the rest next to him.

Richie is closing the window before he can even comprehend what he's doing. He downs the rest of his beer, turns off the record player, and goes to bed.

A call comes into the station late at night. He's just wrapped up a set with "Burning Down The House" by Talking Heads and he has a minute and thirty seconds before the next interval. The phone rings and the producer quickly screens it, saying something Richie can't hear, before patching the call into Richie's headphones.

"You've got Rich Tozier," he greets, but the other end is silent. He casts a confused look to the producer, who shrugs.

"Anybody there?" Richie drawls into the phone and finally the voice

on the other end speaks.

“What’s your favorite song?” it asks. The voice is somewhat familiar, like a voice in a dream. Richie forces a laugh.

“That’s not really what the request line is for,” he points out, and the voice on the telephone sighs. They only have thirty seconds now before Richie has to start playing music, but he’s already searching through his catalog for his favorite song. It’s something from a life long ago, a song he only listens to when his heartbeat is too loud and he can taste blood in his mouth.

“Where are you calling from?” Richie asks playfully, fingers poised over the play button.

“Out East,” the caller responds. It’s definitely a man, Richie notices. He sighs, the breath sounding crackly over the phone. “Are you gonna play the song or not?” The bitchy tone is so, so familiar, but Richie still can’t place it.

“Alright alright,” Richie says, “As always, I’m a slave to the people.”

He presses play and lets the music fill the studio. A cowbell that feels like the pumping of his heart, unusual instruments twanging out a melody, lyrics that are bitter and hopeful at the same time.

“You asked for my favorite song,” Richie introduces, “So, this

is it," Eddie says, hands in the pockets of his jeans. He scuffs at the ground with the toe of his converse, the wind blowing through the grass around them. They're in the Barrens, not far from where their clubhouse used to be, and they're saying goodbye.

"I'll visit," Richie says, but they both know it's a lie. There's an unspoken truth about Derry—once you leave, you never come back. Richie has a childish hope that he's gonna be the one to break tradition.

But they aren't kids anymore. They graduated last spring, sitting in the stuffy Derry high school gymnasium. Poor Stephanie Uley sat right between Stan and Richie and had to put up with them whispering between each other through the entire ceremony.

The principal called Bill's name first, forever the leader of the Losers, and when he'd gone to collect his diploma a loud whoop had erupted from Richie's mouth before he could stop it. He cheered for them all, Mike Hanlon next and then Eddie and then it was his turn. He thought no one was gonna cheer for him and then he heard a yell from Stanley and poor Stephanie Uley's name got lost somewhere in the midst of all the shouting and clapping, Stanley for Richie and Richie for Stanley and Mike and Bill and Eddie for both of them.

The remaining Losers congregated at the end of the aisle after the ceremony was done and the band finished playing Pomp and Circumstance, Bill and Mike and Eddie and Richie and Stan, and they hugged. It was long and a little awkward, their lanky almost-adult limbs not fitting together with the ease they had when they were kids. They took a moment and spared a thought to the two missing from their septet; Ben, whose family had moved away the way they always did, and Beverly, who was somewhere in Portland at this moment, sharing her graduation

with some other group of friends.

Then the moment ended and they broke the hug to dole out back slaps and handshakes to each other, Bill's grip tight and strong in Richie's grasp. He had hugged Mike Hanlon next, and then Stan, stealing the graduation cap right off Stan's head and joking that he'd hoped to find a yarmulke underneath.

And then he'd come to Eddie.

Richie wrangled Eddie in quickly, squeezing the shorter boy (not a boy anymore) to his chest and when he pulled back, Eddie waited half a beat before leaning in and kissing Richie's cheek, feather-light. His brown eyes were wide and half-scared and Richie leaned back in and pecked him on the mouth, quick as he could. And then he pulled Eddie back into his chest and ruffled his hair and said something dumb in one of his Voices.

They separated after a long while and went dutifully to their parents, but Richie had caught Eddie's eye across the crowd and they shared a secret smile, the type of smile that said we did it and I love you.

Then suddenly it's August and Richie's leaving. Off to college in California, about as far away from Maine as he could get. Eddie's headed west too, but not as far, just to New York.

"You'll come back, right?" Eddie asks quietly, head bent down. There's an unspoken end to his sentence. You'll come back if It's not dead, like you promised. "You're gonna remember me, right?"

Eddie's voice is wavering, thin like when they were kids and Eddie was always one step away from an asthma attack. Richie is suddenly nostalgic and so, so fond.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Richie says seriously. Eddie nods, a small thing, and his face crumples.

"I'm gonna miss you, Trashmouth," he says and it's all Richie can do to keep from bursting into tears. He's a man now, eighteen years old, but suddenly he feels like he's eleven and visiting his best friend in the hospital, his best friend with the broken arm and psychosomatic asthma.

"Aw, no you won't," Richie deflects, hands deep in the pockets of his ripped jeans. Eddie shakes his head and Richie swears he sees a tear run down Eddie's cheek but the other boy (man) reaches up and brushes it away lightning-fast. "Come on, Eds," Richie voice breaks and Eddie shakes his head again.

There's a tense moment and then Eddie looks up and is surging forward, hands reaching up to cup Richie's face and then they're kissing. Richie's eyes shutter closed, not before getting a glimpse of Eddie's lashes fluttering against freckled cheeks.

It's not their first kiss, not nearly their first at all, but it feels like the first one. There's a hesitance behind it, but instead of the oh-god-don't-hate-me-after-this hesitance of the first one, it's an oh-god-don't-leave-me-after-this.

Richie tangles his fingers in the collar of Eddie's flannel, tilting his head to the side to deepen the kiss. Eddie's fingers are smooth on his chin,

trembling slightly, and Richie reaches his other arm around Eddie's waist to pull him closer. The dirt kicks up under their feet, drifting into the air and settling on their shoes.

When they separate, Eddie's tears have wet Richie's cheeks. He wipes at his nose with his sleeve and avoids eye contact with Richie.

"I'm really gonna miss you," he repeats, and Richie doesn't joke about it this time. He just pulls Eddie into a hug and lets the other boy cry into his shoulder.

After a long time, he pulls a CD out of his pocket, a mix of all his favorite songs. He pushes it into Eddie's hands and the other boy looks confused.

"Whenever you miss me, take a listen," Richie says seriously. He smiles and breaks the moment. "And picture me banging Stevie Nicks."

Eddie huffs out a laugh and slips the CD into his back pocket. He kisses Richie's cheek, wipes his eyes, and walks home.

Richie leaves for California the next morning.

When Richie comes back to earth, his favorite song is halfway over and his producer is looking at him from behind the studio glass, concerned. He notices distractedly that a tear is falling down his cheek and wipes it away with a shaking hand.

He listens to the rest of “Gold Dust Woman” by Fleetwood Mac and thinks of the mystery caller the entire time.

Life goes on. Before Richie knows it, it's been ten years since he moved out west and when he tries to conjure up a picture of what his life was like before he left Maine, all he can imagine is a dusty house and a coppery smell

(blood)

that he can't recognize.

He feels a pull in his chest though, a pressure underneath his ribs, that draws him towards something, someone,

(six someones)

but he doesn't know what it could possibly be. The pull is magnetic, and when he tries to follow his internal compass, it takes him to inexplicable things. The synagogue just outside his neighborhood, a shop with a grey bike in the window, a pharmacy with a bored looking teenage girl behind the counter.

He tries as hard as he can, but he can't find the missing pieces of himself.

Until early in the morning, on a balmy Southern California night,

Richie has a nightmare.

He has nightmares often— he wakes up with his legs all twisted up in the sheets. His forehead always has a thin sheen of sweat over it and his chest heaves with deep, choked breath, but he can never remember what he dreamt about. He gets snatches occasionally, but they're never concrete. Just the faint feel of *something's wrong something is so wrong why isn't anyone helping us* and a smell of dust that stays in his nose even when he finally goes back to sleep.

It's different this time, though. He remembers this nightmare, remembers running through the Barrens, yelling behind himself, saying "Hurry up, Eds,

we're almost there" Richie calls over his shoulder and catches a glimpse of a small boy with dark hair that's plastered to his forehead with sweat. He's got a big white cast on one arm and his shorts are red. Eddie, his brain supplies, that's Eddie. They're young in the dream, Richie supposes they're no older than twelve.

They're headed towards the clubhouse, crashing through long grass and crawling over boulders. Richie's leading the way and he's pretty sure Eddie is about to have an attack. His breathing is heavy and hoarse but they can't take the time to stop and rest. Bowers could be anywhere.

"That fuckin' hick," Richie mutters harshly to himself. His own breathing is stuttering and he's tired of running, always fucking running. Every step feels like his shoes are full of lead, the way they do when you're trying to escape in a dream.

They tramp across another few hundred yards of grass and finally Richie sees the camouflaged door of the clubhouse. He's about to turn and urge Eddie along when he hears a quick yelp and the sound of someone hitting the ground hard. He turns quick and trips over his own feet, rolling his ankle and going down onto the grass. His recovery is dream-slow, like swimming in molasses, and when he finally gets to his hands and knees, Eddie is on the ground and fuckin' Henry Bowers is on top of him.

He yells and tries to crawl forwards, but it's like he can't move. He watches Bowers flip Eddie around and hold his arms down, pressing hard into Eddie's cast.

"You like throwing rocks?" Henry is yelling in Eddie's face, and the boy is breathing hard. Eddie squirms and tries to get his legs under him to buck Henry off, but the older boy is heavy across his abdomen, and he can't get any purchase on the rocks.

"Richie," Eddie cries pathetically. "Richie, he's gonna break my arm again."

"Get off him!" Richie yells and Henry looks up and it's not Henry anymore, it's the Clown. Its red lips turn into a smile and It narrows yellow eyes. There's spit dripping off Its chin and it splashes onto Eddie's forehead. He's still squirming, harder now. Eddie's biting his lip between his teeth and It curls a gloved hand around his cast and squeezes harder.

"Richie, he's gonna break my arm again," Eddie repeats, voice strange. The words don't feel genuine anymore, it seems like they're being forced out of Eddie's mouth. "He broke my arm already, he chased me and shoved my face into the ground and he broke my arm and you weren't there. "

“What,” Richie breathes, the air punched out of him in a rush. He freezes in his struggling.

“RICHIE, HE’S GONNA BREAK MY ARM AGAIN!” Eddie screams and he’s rotting, Eddie’s rotting away. His nose sinks in and there’s just two holes where his nostrils are, the skin peeling and flaking off, skin like sandpaper. His cheeks are hollow and show his teeth and puss seeps out of the side of his mouth. His eyes become big and sunken in, he’s dying, Eddie’s fucking dying and Richie can’t do anything.

Eddie convulses on the ground, still pinned down by that fucking Clown, spewing this black stuff out of his mouth. The rocks under Richie’s knees are biting and wear holes in his jeans, scraping his skin and making him bleed over the ground and he’s screaming, screaming and crying and scrambling to get to Eddie.

“Can’t do anything right, Trashmouth,” Eddie chokes, black fluid staining his teeth. “Can’t save me and can’t save Bill you can’t save Stan you can’t even fuckin save yourself.”

“Stop,” Richie cries, but Eddie just keeps going, voice getting louder and hoarser and his shirt is covered in black puke and his skin is like dried leather. Richie can hear bones cracking, the clown pressing down and down, forcing Eddie’s cast into his chest and his ribs. There’s a ripping sound, like tearing paper, and the cast is breaking and coming off and Richie can see blood but he can’t move.

“YOU’RE GONNA DIE TRASHMOUTH WE’RE ALL GONNA FUCKING DIE!” Eddie yells and finally, finally Richie finds purchase. He stumbles forward, hands clawing into the dirt, mud under his fingernails, and is

almost to Eddie and It, Pennywise, the fucking Clown. He crawls the last few feet and it's too late everything's too late Eddie's cheek is completely eaten through and he can see the bones of his jaw, and he's biting his own tongue until it bleeds. The blood is everywhere, running onto the dusty ground and mixing in, black with dirt. It stains Eddie's shirt and Richie's knees and there's a small part of him that knows his parents are gonna be pissed because blood is a bitch to get out of denim.

He looks up and he's staring directly into the yellow eyes of It, the eyes that track him with every step he takes. It smiles, slow and meaningful. Eddie is deathly still beneath him.

"Beep beep, Richie," It taunts and then Its jaw unhinges, showing rows and rows of sharp yellow teeth and It's leaning down and It fucking sinks Its teeth into Eddie's neck and fucking RIPS HIS HEAD OFF and Richie feels the blood gush over his face, it's in his eyes and his mouth and it's choking him he can't breathe and EDDIE'S DEAD HE'S FUCKING DEAD WAKE UP WAKE UP IT'S NOT REAL NONE OF IT IS REAL

He bolts up in bed with a jolt, heart pounding in his chest.

It's not real. None of it is real.

Except... Richie knows Eddie is real. He knows somewhere deep in his bones, a memory that he can't believe he'd forgotten,

("You're gonna remember me, right?")

that Eddie Kaspbrak, his best friend, is real.

But the events from his dream— they never happened. Yes, Henry Bowers broke Eddie's arm and likely would have done worse, but It never got Eddie. No, Eddie helped *kill* It, It was dead and was never

("Swuh-swear to muh-me that you'll c-c-come buh-back.")

coming back.

He repeats the thought to himself, *never coming back never coming back*, but his childish fear doesn't abate. He lays awake for the rest of the night, tossing and turning. He's bombarded with these glimpses of memories, moments he repressed long ago, days that were stolen from him. When he finally accepts that his racing brain is showing him his past life, Richie relaxes and lets himself get lost in the memories.

Bill teaching him how to fix the chain on his bike. Nimble hands oiling the joints and spinning the tires. He flicks a bit of oil at Richie and it splashes on his glasses, which Richie tries to wipe off with an equally oily fingertip. His left lens is a smeared mess for a good two days.

Ben making Richie a mixtape. He slips a New Kids on the Block song on it as if he thinks Richie won't notice. It's secretly his favorite song on the entire tape.

Mike offering his camera out to a stranger on the street during a Derry street carnival in high school, saying *"Can you please take a photo of me and my friends?"* and smiling at them with his white teeth. The picture comes out a little blurry, but Richie is smushed between Eddie and Mike and he's pretty sure he's never looked happier in his life.

Stan sitting next to Richie at the Uris dinner table, laughing and joking with his parents and brothers. Every time he cracks a joke and shoots Richie a private smile, Richie feels like part of the family.

Bev smiling shyly as she leans across the clubhouse to hand Richie a wrapped box on his birthday. He opens it to find a Zippo of his very own inside, his initials engraved on the side. She teaches him how to flick it open and light it and he uses it on a cigarette that gets passed around the group.

Eddie propped up in a hospital bed with his broken arm, looking so big and so small all at once.

Eddie sitting on the floor of the clubhouse, knees draw to his chest, eyes watering and nose red. The summer heat makes his allergies act up and Richie watches with a smile as he sneezes three times in a row. Richie thinks distantly that he should probably find it gross, but instead his heart squeezes with inexplicable fondness.

Eddie arguing with Richie over the rules of spitting loogies. His words are sharp and angry but there's a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. Richie's sure he probably looks just as stupidly happy.

Eddie on the first day of high school, finding Richie before school and making him show where his new locker is, so Eddie knows which one to leave notes in. By the end of the school year Richie has a collection of all the dumb papers Eddie had dropped through the slots; little doodles of their classmates and teachers, jokes about their friends, sometimes homework assignments he figures Richie had forgotten about. In return, Richie gets a hold of Eddie's schedule and makes it his mission to steal answer keys for every one of his tests, folding them up and sliding them between the pages of Eddie's textbooks.

Eddie sitting in the passenger seat of Richie's first car. Richie looks over at him while they're idling at a stoplight. The red light reflects off his face, casting shadows over smooth skin and curly hair that's falling into his eyes. Richie is pretty sure he could lean over and kiss him, kiss him right now, and everything would work out. He'd grab Eddie's hand where it's resting on center console and interlace their fingers and Eddie would blush pink.

But then the light turns green and Richie doesn't notice because he's having an internal freak out, so the car behind him honks twice and then Eddie laughs at him and the moment is over.

Watching Eddie run his first track meet, wearing brand new sneakers and a pair of stupid short shorts. Richie screams through the entire race, jumping up and down on the bleachers and pissing off everyone else in his row. Eddie comes in third, earning himself a bronze medal and blisters on his heels that bleed all over his new shoes.

Eddie choking on smoke as they all pass their first joint around. Bill slaps him on the back with a laugh but Richie's heart is beating a mile a minute as he wonders if it's going to trigger some remnant of the asthma Eddie used to have. But the second time the joint is passed to him, he breathes in and holds it in this time, and when he

exhales smoke into the air, his breath doesn't even shudder. Richie feels weirdly proud.

Eddie scoffing in the middle of some Richie-rant and grabbing his collar and pulling him forward. Richie only has a moment to think *this is it* and Eddie's kissing him, close mouthed and a little off center. Richie makes a muffled sound of surprise and then tilts his head a little, eyes closed. The angle is better then, their mouths lining up and moving against one another. Eddie leans away and Richie follows him for a half-second before leaning back too.

"It was just to get you to shut up, Trashmouth," Eddie says, eyes big and brown.

"Sure it was," Richie agrees sarcastically and then dives back in for one more.

Ditching their senior prom to smoke in his basement, pressed together on an old leather couch. They undo their ties and shuck their jackets. Richie has a pair of striped socks on under his dress shoes, a Christmas gift from Stan's parents, and Eddie's boutonniere is yellow like the sunflowers in front of Neibolt house. Richie rolls up a joint and lights it with his battered Zippo and he and Eddie pass it back and forth

By the time midnight comes, they're pleasantly high and Eddie is between Richie's outstretched legs, leaning his back against Richie's chest.

Bill shows up after the dance ends, laughing out a *"Y-you guh-guys*

missed Stan sucking face with his d-date,” as he unloops his bowtie. He doesn't blink an eye at their position on the couch and Richie thinks again how lucky they are to have a friend like Bill. His eyebrows do raise as he glimpses the remnants of two joints and about six cigarettes in the ashtray. *“Did you save any f-fuh-for me?”*

“Of course we did, Billy boy,” Richie responds and he can feel Eddie's shoulders shake with giggles.

They stay up until 4am and Richie wakes up at noon the next day with a sore neck and Eddie's face plastered against his shoulder, drooling all over his dress shirt. Someone (Bill) has thrown a blanket over them and Eddie's skin is hot like a fever, his forehead sweaty where it rests on Richie's neck.

Richie leans down to kiss the top of his head and goes back to sleep.

Throwing his graduation cap into the air, feeling years of weight fall off his shoulders. Posing for pictures with the remaining Losers, sticking his tongue out and getting Bill in a headlock. Grabbing Eddie's diploma and holding it above his head because Richie is always going to be an asshole and becoming a legal adult will never change that. Kissing Eddie in a private alcove around the side of school, where no wandering kids and parents will see them.

Hurriedly burning songs onto a CD, collecting up every melody that reminds him of Eddie's smile, and putting them all in one place. He writes *Eddie's Mix* on the CD and slips it into a paper case carefully, making sure not to get any fingerprints or scratches on it. He slides the case into his front jacket pocket and gets on his bike, late for a very important date.

A goodbye kiss in the barrens.

Hanging a photo on his corkboard, looking at it every morning.

Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.

He finally falls back asleep about an hour before his alarm clock blares at seven am. He sits up in bed and rubs his eyes. Somewhere between getting up and brushing his teeth, Richie forgets again. One moment it's there's and then suddenly he's drinking a cup of coffee at the kitchen table, window open, and his mind is clear again.

(Much later, he wonders how often this happens to him. How often does he remember and reminisce all night, only to have it all stolen away from him the next morning)

Later in the day his arm goes up in a gesture of muscle memory, a move to push his glasses back further onto his nose. He gets halfway there before he remembers he's wearing contact lenses. He hasn't worn glasses in years.

"Beep beep, Richie," a phantom voice giggles. Richie goes on with his day.

That night, after a long and unproductive shift at the station, he gets a call from another phantom from his past. Mike Hanlon wants him

to come back to Derry. Mike Hanlon, who Richie had forgotten existed until the name showed up on his caller ID.

(It's back It's back It's fucking back and they're all gonna die this time for real)

He hurriedly packs a bag, books a plane ticket, calls work and tells them he's taking a vacation.

When he walks by his desk, there's a picture pinned next to his to-do list of a kid in gym shorts and a pink polo shirt, laughing with twinkling eyes. Richie stops and stares for a while and carefully pulls the picture down off the cork board. He folds it up and stashes it in his wallet and then he gets on a plane goes *home* for the first time in ten years.

Author's Note:

classic mac, projecting her love of fleetwood mac onto her favorite characters.

thanks again to kat and coral and zin and eli for all your support as i've slowly lost my mind! i love you guys!!!

come visit me on tumblr @cryingbilddenbrough if you would like to see my descent into madness over a dumb book abt some kids and a killer clown